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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5180  
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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0190  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0219  
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 0376  
RUEHBAD/AMCONSUL PERTH 0183  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000154

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SUBJECT: THE HIGH-LEVEL US DELEGATION'S VISIT TO MAURITANIA

-- THEMES AND OBSERVATIONS

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

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(C) Key Points  
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-- The Mauritians, whether in government, civil society, or politics, made a convincing case that they are committed to a national transition to democracy. But their timeline is extremely ambitious. They will need technical and financial assistance, from us and from others, in order to succeed.

-- The most immediate danger to the election process is the impending census and the associated national voter list will be done poorly. That could throw off the timetable. It would certainly make election results less credible. It could even cause civil strife.

-- As many as 200,000 Mauritanian citizens of voting age do not have the national identity cards needed to register to vote. Many, maybe even most, are Afro-Mauritians. The danger remains that Afro-Mauritians will be disenfranchised at a much higher rate than other racial groups in the census and voter registration process. The Embassy is raising this issue frequently, including with Colonel Fal during the delegation's visit.

-- Miscommunication and suspicion continue to hinder cooperation between political parties and civil society.

-- Mauritanian government officials continued to express their unwavering commitment to counterterrorism.

End Key Points.

¶1. (C) The high level mission to Nouakchott headed by AF PDAS Bobby Pittman contributed significantly to the advancement of our policy in Mauritania. The delegation met with government officials (septel) and members of political parties and civil society (septel).

¶2. (C) The Embassy's assessment is that, in every meeting, the delegation succeeded in impressing upon the Mauritians the need to adhere strictly to the established election timetable. The delegation also succeeded in communicating the USG's interest in engaging with the Mauritians on issues of vital interest, such as democracy and

counter-terrorism. The delegation also promised a return to full relations following free and fair elections. That came under attack by some of the "independent" press, but it was certainly the right thing to say.

¶3. (C) The delegation was led by AF PDAS Bobby Pittman, and included S/CT Virginia Palmer, DRL DAS Jeff Krilla, AF/W Director Phil Carter, OSD Principal Director Office of African Affairs Chuck Kosak, NSC Director of African Affairs Mark Swayne, and Democracy Officers Ryan McCannell and Dana Beegun from USAID.

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ELECTION TIMETABLE  
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¶4. (C) The transitional government has committed to hold a series of elections culminating in the turnover of power to a constitutional government, which PDAS Pittman correctly described in his press statement as "ambitious." While realizing the obstacles facing them, virtually all the Mauritians with whom the delegation met were optimistic that the goal could be met. International observers, including the local head of the UN mission, strongly agreed with the PDAS's assessment. Several are quite concerned about the Mauritians' ability to hold to the timetable, even with significant technical and financial assistance.

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POLITICAL PARTY-CIVIL SOCIETY: COMPETITORS FOR AID  
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¶5. (C) In several meetings, the delegation witnessed first-hand the miscommunication and suspicion between

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political parties and civil society. For their part, political parties were largely unable to work effectively together, and refused to consider that civil society had a role in the political process. While government officials stressed their open and collaborative approach, some political parties expressed frustration at not having been consulted enough during the election planning process.

¶6. (C) The delegation has a useful meeting with all 16 members of the National Independent Electoral Commission. From their words and demeanor, the commission members clearly took seriously their role as overseers of a historic process. They appeared to guard jealously their independence. However, they were quick to admit that they were not elections experts. From the discussion it was clear that the members understood the daunting task ahead.

¶7. (C) Significantly, despite some criticism about the commission's ability to fulfill its mission, the delegation did not hear any complaints about the integrity of commission members.

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THE AFRO-MAURITANIAN ISSUE  
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¶8. (C) The delegation heard several comments about the extent to which Afro-Mauritians, both inside and outside Mauritania, can participate in the electoral process. Col. Fal was adamant in his meeting with the delegation that Mauritania was not in the position to conduct any type of out-of-country voting given the short timetable. He refused to provide any views on establishing procedures to allow Mauritians residing outside to return to vote.

¶9. (C) At the same time, quite a few Mauritians appear to view full participation of Afro-Mauritians in the process as a critical element for credible elections. While an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 eligible Mauritanian voters do not currently have national identity cards -- which are

required to register to vote -- the vast majority of these are Afro-Mauritanians. The government has taken efforts to accelerate the ID issuance process, but the Embassy continues to assess that Afro-Mauritanians are likely to be disenfranchised at a much higher rate than other racial groups. Embassy officers continue to raise these concerns whenever and wherever appropriate.

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COUNTERTERRORISM  
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¶10. (C) On all occasions Mauritanian government officials expressed their unwavering commitment to counterterrorism. Most telling, however, was the delegation's meeting with the five heads of intelligence services. The discussions clearly demonstrated that the services do not routinely interact (please see septels for additional information and comment, including IIRs).

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NEXT STEPS  
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¶11. (C) At all levels, the Mauritanians welcomed and encouraged U.S. participation in the transition process. The visit also raised expectations for increased U.S. involvement in the future.

¶12. (C) Embassy encourages the Department to fund electoral assistance to the greatest extent possible. It strongly recommends that the UN basket fund be funded as much as possible. NDI is also doing critically important work with the political parties and should be funded, too.

¶13. (U) This cable was prepared after the departure of the delegation. The delegation has not cleared the text.  
LeBaron